



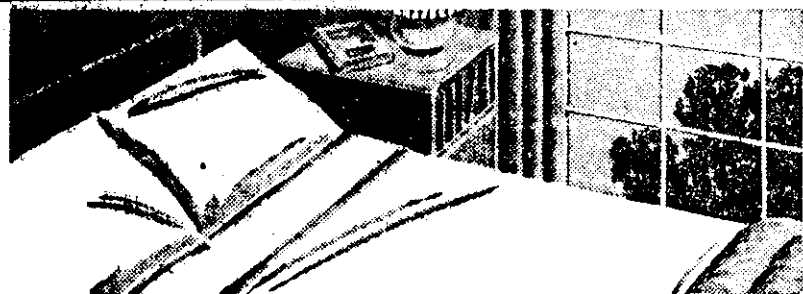
NEWS!

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BOOKS

The Phoenix or the Turtle

KATHERINE MANSFIELD'S LETTERS TO JOHN MIDDLETON MURRY. Constable. English price, 45s.

(Reviewed by David Hall)

AT last many of the veils that obscured the memory of Katherine Mansfield are lifted, even if not quite all. Nothing is so graceful as truth, and here is a considerable helping of the truth about Katherine Mansfield. This book is what used to be called a "human document," a chronicle of suffering and love, of exaltation and abasement. The letters exhibit in a most moving degree that "revulsion from the brutality of life" which Murry finds in the stories.

The first letters were written in 1913 when she and Murry had already recognised their love for each other, but they are infrequent until 1915. Her illness, gradually gaining ground from that time on, made its most substantial conquest in early 1918, when Katherine Mansfield was held up in Paris in the confusion of the German bombardment (with Big Bertha), in circumstances physically and emotionally distressing. To her tuberculosis substantially we owe most of these letters. She had to go away in search of health for most of each year—to the South of France, to Cornwall, to Italy or to Switzerland. Thus bad health, separation and the mishaps of foreign travel all contribute their share of suffering.

Murry and Katherine Mansfield were not married until May, 1918, as her first husband, Bowden, delayed completing their divorce. The book is the history of their relationship; it gains much by being separated from letters to others who meant less to her. Perhaps it is more passionately expressed, because of the constantly renewed journeys abroad, than its strength would quite bear. One has the feeling at times that Katherine Mansfield was desperately bidding for a continuance of Murry's affection, bidding against influences which usually must be left to be imagined, with little to offer besides her talent and a not wholly effectual love. Some letters have a hectic quality, a straining after wit and gaiety before the lid of the tomb closes down. Very few frankly surrender to despair.

THE letters are more the true Katherine Mansfield than her stories. Here she does not labour each word as she did, with such beautiful results, in her stories. Their language is slangy, personal, private. They have little self-consciousness, in spite of a vein of teasing nursery talk which is really a by-

product of intimacy—or an attempt to create it. Much in the letters is taken up with money ways and means, much with the *Athenaeum* while Murry edited it. But there is plenty of scope for the pictures of things seen, or of persons, which Katherine Mansfield could draw with such zest and skill in so small a compass.

The most surprising person in these pages is Katherine's faithful companion, L.M. or Ida, whom she hates and loves, writhes from and relies on, who follows her in all her journeys, with a voracious affection which is sometimes recognised but scarcely rewarded. One cannot help feeling a gleam of sympathy for this lumpish Rhodesian who so consistently failed to please.

Katherine Mansfield neither grows nor shrinks in stature in these pages. Little, except perhaps the delightful fantasies about the cats, is added to our knowledge of her as a writer. The impression of her as a person is altered slightly; she becomes both more heroic and more loyal, and we realise more clearly the abysses of depression which she faced and rarely shuddered at.

KATHERINE MANSFIELD
"In all love affairs one will love more than the other"

The dust jacket blurb makes something of a flourish about the completeness of these letters ("remarkable series of unexpurgated love-letters"); do not be deceived. The editor constantly leaves a name blank where Katherine Mansfield commits herself to a derogatory opinion, the names most often omitted being those of writers. Thus there is a considerable deliberate suppression of her critical opinions. I find the sheer childishness of this sort of omission its most teasing feature. "And wasn't ———'s poem ridiculous? It was like a dead earwig." In a very few cases there might be good reason for an omission. But where the quality of the book is seriously damaged by this excessive delicacy, one must protest at it.

THEN the gloss upon some passages could obviously have been taken much further. We are left wondering about too much. Who, for instance, was the F. to whom Katherine was willing to pay £40 to buy back the letters she had once written him? More serious still is Murry's failure to tell us more of what he wrote in his own letters to his wife. It is apparent that some at least of these still exist. Some of their occasional insensitiveness is reflected back, in irony or in rare indignation, in Katherine's letters. "You were willing to join me if I wanted you—you were prepared, like a shot, to be of help to me." Admittedly it must always be very hard when one person presents evidence of his relations with another, long dead, not to want to put things in the best